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P. URIS, LEON

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The trouble with fiction these days is you can't depend on it to be untrue. Those strolling romancers we used to put up at the castle to strum noble lies to us now wear business suits, call themselves nonfiction novelists and retail small-print truths from gray filing cabinets.

Here is Leon Uris, a novelist trying to pass once more as historian—and just when Cornelius (*The Last Battle*) Ryan and Barbara (*The Guns of August*) Tuchman have conditioned us to the opposite, to expect history to read like a novel. Braced by interviews with former diplomats and intelligence agents, the author of *Exodus* is presenting *Topaz*, in effect, as the inside story of the Cuban missile crisis—and more.

Readers anticipating a documented revision of recent history can stop taking notes and rest easy or, still better, pull out from the back of the refrigerator the hash and potato salad reserved for second-rank door-to-door troubadours. At the center of Uris' cast of thousands is a French intelligence agent in Washington named André Devereaux. A kind of bush-league latter-day Lafayette, he sounds an early warning to the U.S. that Russia is shipping atomic warheads to Cuba. Along with his tireless ramparts-watching, André, in the inimitable words of his creator, is "a sophisticated and traveled man of many nights." He happily checks out the Cuban details in person with our girl in Havana, La Palomita, the Little Dove, a "needing feline creature" who flutters or stalks, as the case may be, from bedroom to bedroom in the cause of anti-Castroism.

Washington is more grateful than Paris for the André-Little Dove scoop. The barely make-believe president of France is General Pierre La Croix, "an obsessed, arrogant, aging dictator" who believes the Cuban confrontation is a gigantic hoax. He believes this—here comes Uris' blockbuster—because he is surrounded by the highly placed operatives of a Communist ring, code-named Topaz, whose mission is to feed him "Disinformation."

Where does fiction end? Where does purported history begin? An all-embracing stylistic implausibility makes such true-false distinctions almost ir-

relevant. It is awfully hard to believe—on any subject—a writer whose tin-ear notion of a folk singer is Hound-Dog Ruffin ("The great blues warbler sat before a rinky-dink piano and sang about cotton fields in the sky"). This sort of banality saturates *Topaz*. It seeps into the characters. All Cubans are "sensual children," all Russians are "rough-hewn and without an ounce of sophistication," all French gleam with "aplomb" and "high smartness." It gets into the smallest episodes. Who but Uris, selecting a book for a spy's recognition signal, would choose Irving Wallace's *The Chapman Report*?

With his knack for being simultaneously commonplace and improbable, Uris has nearly done the impossible. He has come absurdly close to persuading us that those terrible cliff-hanger days of late 1962 never happened, in spite of the heavy organ chords he thumps in the background: "And was not this decision too great a judgment for a single mortal? Was it not God's decision if the human race should survive or perish?" etc., etc.

At the end, André has bounced back from near oblivion, though he seems to be groggily confusing *la belle France* with La Palomita ("If that beautiful woman's life meant anything to this world, I have to fight on. . ."). Even the daughter of a defecting Russian spy has recovered her rough-hewn spirits enough to compose a piano piece called "An American Dream."

Still, their resilience is nothing to that of Uris, who sets a much needed example of endurance to his readers. Cheerfully he proposes disasters, zestfully he marches to meet them. The selfless reader can begin to take pleasure—maybe for the first time—when he realizes how much pleasure the book is giving Uris. Lord help us, how the man loves to write!

The rule of pleasant-writing-painful-reading is nothing new, and on the occasion of another best-seller Oscar Wilde composed the perfect epitaph for *Topaz*. "As one turns over the pages," he wrote, "the suspense of the author becomes almost unbearable."

Mr. Maddocks is book editor of The Christian Science Monitor.

by Melvin Maddocks

## BOOK REVIEW

# The Uris School of Non-Fiction Fiction

TOPAZ

by LEON URIS (McGraw-Hill Book Company) \$5.95

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